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BPA to honor folksinger on 60th anniversary of his work

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Bonneville Power Administration

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PORTLAND, Ore. – Sixty years ago this month, folksinger and songwriter Woody Guthrie wrote 26 songs for the Bonneville Power Administration. The BPA hired Guthrie for one month to produce music it would use in a film, "The Columbia."

On May 24, BPA will honor Guthrie's memory at a 60th anniversary tribute at its Portland headquarters. Acting Administrator Steve Wright will unveil a landscape tribute, and the agency will name its entrance "The Woody Guthrie Circle."

The program begins at 12:45 p.m. at BPA's main entrance off NE 11th Avenue across the Max tracks from the Lloyd Center DoubleTree Hotel. A folk song group, The Wanderers, will play some of Guthrie's music. At 1 p.m., Vice President Terry Esvelt will introduce guests. Wright will follow with remarks about Guthrie and then unveil a landscape tribute.

Back in 1941, Guthrie traveled across Oregon and Washington during his one month on the BPA payroll. He visited farms, towns, Native American locales and the construction site of Grand Coulee Dam. He penned songs and plucked tunes on his guitar about the plight of the people, the land and the times. He sang about what he had seen and heard, as he did throughout most of his travels and a musical career that spanned the continent and nearly three decades.

Although World War II delayed the film production, when "The Columbia" came out in 1949, it had three Guthrie songs – "Roll on Columbia," "Pastures of Plenty" and "Grand Coulee Dam." Other Columbia songs enjoyed national popularity for some time. Later Guthrie tunes were highly popular and became part of American tradition – "This Land is Your Land," "Hard Travelin" and "So Long, It's Been Good To Know Ya."

In 1987, the Washington legislature designated "Roll on Columbia" as the official state folk song.

BPA had previously named one of its early substations in honor of Guthrie. It was sold along with dozens of other small substations the agency has been turning over to the utilities it serves.

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